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Remembering Poemen Remembering: The Desert Fathers and the Spirituality of Memory

WILLIAM HARMLESS, SJ

I. INTRODUCTION

In 407, a tribe of barbarian raiders known as Mazices came sweeping off the Libyan desert and devastated one of the first great centers of Christian monasticism, the settlement of Scetis.¹ Scetis was located in a remote desert valley west of the Nile and had been founded around 330 by one of the pioneers of the monastic movement, Macarius the Egyptian (d. 390). Before the attack, it had enjoyed an international reputation for its ascetic rigor and incisive wisdom. Word of the devastation spread rapidly, even to the Latin West. Augustine knew of it and counted it among the great disasters of the time.² And when the sack of Rome took place a couple of years later, in 410, one of Scetis's survivors, Abba Arsenius, would link the two events: "The world has lost Rome and the monks have lost Scetis."³ Scetis's destruction marked a turning point in the history of early Christian monasticism. The site would be resettled a few years later, and in fact would suffer

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1. The classic study is by H. G. Evelyn White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi 'n Natrûn*, part 2, *The History of the Monasteries of Nitria and of Scetis* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art Egyptian Expedition, 1932). See also Jean-Claude Guy, "Le Centre monastique de Scété dans la littérature du V^e siècle," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 30 (1964): 129–47, and Tim Vivian, "The Monasteries of the Wadi Natrun, Egypt: A Personal and Monastic Journey," *American Benedictine Review* 49 (1998): 3–32.
2. Augustine, *Epistula* 111, ed. A. Goldbacher, *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* [Vienna, 1887–; hereafter CSEL] 34: 643).
3. *Apophthegmata patrum* Arsenius 21, *Patrologia graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (1857–66; hereafter PG) 65:93. Translations from the *Apophthegmata* (hereafter abbreviated as AP) are, unless otherwise noted, from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*, trans. and ed. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1984).

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other barbarian raids, notably in 434, 444, and 570. But after this first one, many of its leading monks dispersed and never returned.

This diaspora proved providential. A group of seven brothers led by Abba Poemen and Abba Anoub fled initially to Terenuthis on the Nile. They first took refuge in an abandoned pagan temple. Soon after arriving, Anoub asked the group to spend a week in silent retreat. Each morning he would throw rocks at one of the temple's stone statues, and each evening he would kneel down and ask it to forgive him. He did the same all week. At week's end, Abba Poemen asked Anoub to explain his behavior. He answered: "I did this for you. When you saw me throwing stones at the face of the statue, did it speak? Or did it get angry?" "No," Poemen replied. So Anoub continued, "Now there are seven of us. If all of you want to live together, let us be like this statue—unmoved whether one beats on it or flatters it. If you do not wish to live like this, there are four doors here in the temple. Let each one go out the one he wishes." The group accepted Anoub's proposal and bound themselves to one another.⁴

The decision would prove momentous, for, as we will see, Abba Poemen and his circle would play a decisive role in creating one of the great classics of monastic spirituality: the *Apophthegmata patrum*, or *Sayings of the Fathers*.⁵ It is an extraordinary anthology. In its pages, one finds "a motley band of colorful characters, wild adventures, and stinging, memorable 'one-liners.'"⁶ Its publication would mark an important milestone in the literature of late antiquity. As Peter Brown has noted, "the *Sayings* provided a remarkable new literary genre, close to the world of parable and folk-wisdom. . . . In these *Sayings*, the peasantry of Egypt spoke for the first time to the civilized world."⁷

The *Apophthegmata* has come down to us in two basic forms: the Alphabetical Collection and the Systematic Collection. The Alphabetical gathers some one thousand sayings or brief narratives under the names of 130 prominent monks and arranges these according to the Greek alphabet.⁸ Attached to certain manuscripts of the Alphabetical

4. AP Anoub 1 (PG 65:129; trans. my own).

5. For an introduction to and overview of the *Apophthegmata*, see Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). See also the incisive survey by Antoine Guillaumont, "L'enseignement spirituel des moines d'Égypte: La formation d'une tradition," reprinted in *Études sur la spiritualité de l'Orient chrétien*, Spiritualité orientale 66 (Bégrolle-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1996), 81–92.

6. Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, vii–viii.

7. Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150–750* (New York: Norton, 1971), 100.

8. The Greek text of the Alphabetical Collection was published by Jean-Baptiste Cotelier in 1647 from a twelfth-century manuscript and is reprinted in PG 65:71–440. It contains

Collection is an additional set of sayings and stories that had come down to the ancient editors without names. This series, referred to as the Anonymous Collection, had as its original core some 240 sayings, but eventually 400 more came to be attached to this core.⁹

The Systematic Collection contains many of the same sayings and stories, but gathers them under twenty-one different headings or themes, such as "discernment," "unceasing prayer," "hospitality," "humility." The Greek version contains some twelve hundred sayings.¹⁰ In the mid-sixth century, an early version of this Systematic Collection was translated from Greek into Latin by two Roman clerics, the deacon Pelagius and the subdeacon John (who perhaps became the later Popes Pelagius and John). This version, called the *Verba seniorum* (or *Sayings of the Old Men*), was apparently known to Saint Benedict and powerfully influenced the spirituality of medieval monasticism.¹¹ In time, vast collections of *apophthegmata* appeared not only in Greek and Latin, but also in Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Arabic, Ethiopic, and Old Slavonic.

Historians of early monasticism find the historicity of the *Apophthegmata patrum* very difficult to assess.¹² While its stories and sayings

948 sayings. Jean-Claude Guy has supplemented this with 53 more from other Greek manuscripts; see *Recherches sur la tradition grecque des Apophthegmata Patrum*, Subsidia Hagiographica 36 (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1962). Ward's *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* offers a complete translation into English.

9. F. Nau published only the first 396 sayings from the Anonymous Collection in "Histoire des solitaires égyptiens," *Revue d'orient chrétien* 12–14, 17–18 (1907–9, 1912–13). For a translation of Nau 1–132, see Columba Stewart, trans. and ed., *The World of the Desert Fathers* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1986); for a translation of Nau 133–396, see Benedicta Ward, trans. and ed., *The Wisdom of the Desert Fathers* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1986). For a complete translation into French, see *Les Sentences des pères du désert: Série des anonymes*, trans. and ed. Lucien Regnault (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1985).
10. For the Greek text, with a French translation, see *Les Apophthegmes des Pères: Collection systématique I–IX*, trans. and ed. Jean-Claude Guy, Sources chrétiennes (hereafter SC) 387 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1993). This volume includes only the first half; the remainder, books 10–21, is listed as forthcoming. There is as yet no translation of it into English, but a complete translation is available in French: *Les Chemins de Dieu au désert: Collection systématique des Apophthegmes des Pères*, trans. and ed. Lucien Regnault (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1992).
11. The *Verba seniorum* of Pelagius and John was edited by the Jesuit Heribert Rosweyde at Antwerp in 1615, and is reprinted in *Patrologia latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne (1844–65), 73:855–1022. Most of it has been translated into English in Owen Chadwick, *Western Asceticism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1958), 37–189.
12. The best recent overview of the question is by Gould, *Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, 5–25. Gould's own position is that the oral tradition behind the text is substantially trustworthy and that it accurately describes fourth-century monastic views and conditions: "The oral tradition intentionally preserved material both of an anecdotal and a doctrinal character, and its reduction to writing was relatively conservative even though losses and changes undoubtedly occurred. Skepticism about the historical value of the *Sayings* is thus not well founded on a consideration of the evidence which is currently available" (24). Samuel Rubenson argues for a much more

focus on monastic leaders active from the 330s to the 460s, the text itself was not written down until much later, in the late fifth or perhaps early sixth century. While the monastic editor(s) did draw on certain written sources (for instance, Evagrius's *Praktikos*, Palladius's *Lausiac History*, Abba Isaiah's *Asceticon*), the majority of stories seems to have been passed down orally. That means that behind the *Apophthegmata* lies an oral tradition that stretches anywhere from 30 to 180 years. There are other complications. While the written text is in Greek, the oral tradition behind it is largely Coptic. Moreover, the text, as it has come down to us, seems to have been put together not in Egypt, but in Palestine.¹³ Finally, modern interpreters are left to wonder how intervening events such as the Origenist crisis of 400 and the bitter feuds between Chalcedonians and Monophysites after 451 have impinged on what the early editors included and excluded. All this means that interpreters of the *Apophthegmata* cannot avoid grappling with the same sort of historical-critical problems with which interpreters of the New Testament grapple.

In this essay, I will explore the *Apophthegmata* and its hard-to-decipher origins by focusing on its single most prominent character: Abba Poemen (fl. late fourth to mid-fifth centuries). In the best known version of the Alphabetical Collection, 187 sayings are listed under Poemen's name; another 21 sayings are attributed to him in other Greek recensions. Poemen also appears in 25 sayings listed under the names of other figures. In addition, there are 16 sayings unique to the Systematic Collection attributed to him. In other words, nearly one-quarter of the *Apophthegmata* is composed of sayings from or stories about Abba Poemen.¹⁴

Despite Poemen's obvious prominence, few scholarly studies have discussed him, and those few have done so only briefly. In 1923,

skeptical view in *The Letters of St. Antony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 145–62. Rubenson has expressed a basic skepticism about the dependability of any lengthy oral tradition; he also sees the Origenist crisis of 400 as a watershed event that resulted in a deliberate falsification of the monastic tradition. This is part of his larger thesis that the seven letters attributed to Antony are authentic, and that they are evidence that Antony was theologically literate and held decidedly Origenist views, things that he believes were deliberately suppressed in the picture of early monasticism presented in both Athanasius's *Life of Antony* and the *Apophthegmata*. Gould has sharply criticized Rubenson's account; see his article "Recent Work on Monastic Origins: A Consideration of the Questions Raised by Samuel Rubenson's *The Letters of St. Antony*," *Studia Patristica* 25 (1993): 405–416. For an overview, see J. Pollok, "The Present State of Studies on the *Apophthegmata Patrum*: An Outline of Samuel Rubenson's and Graham Gould's Perspectives," in Marek Starowiczski, ed., *The Spirituality of Ancient Monasticism* (Cracow: Tyniec, 1995), 79–90.

13. Lucien Regnault, "Les Apophthegmes des pères en Palestine aux V^e-VI^e siècles," *Irénikon* 54 (1981): 320–30.

14. Guy, introduction to *Apophthegmes des Pères*, SC 387: 77.

Wilhelm Bousset published his pioneering study, *Apophthegmata: Studien zur Geschichte des ältesten Mönchtums*, and in a couple of suggestive pages hypothesized that Poemen and "his school" played a pivotal role in the formation of the great collections.¹⁵ Since then, Poemen has been discussed briefly by two leading scholars of early monasticism, Derwas Chitty and Jean-Claude Guy.¹⁶ Only one published study, to the best of my knowledge, has been devoted exclusively to Poemen and his sayings.¹⁷

Many figures in the *Apophthegmata* are cross-listed, so to speak, in other works of early monasticism. For instance, Macarius the Egyptian, the founder of Scetis, appears not only in the *Apophthegmata*, but also in Evagrius Ponticus's *Praktikos*, in Palladius's *Lausiac History*, in the anonymous *History of the Monks of Egypt*, and in Socrates' *Church History*.¹⁸ Poemen is surprisingly absent from these classics.¹⁹ However, he does figure significantly in a little-known text, the Ethiopic *Collectio monastica*. Victor Arras first published the text in 1963, but its significance only began to be appreciated after Lucien Regnault delivered an important paper on it at the 1983 International Conference on Patristic Studies. There Regnault argued that the *Collectio Monastica* preserves an authentic fifth-century source, one that, like the *Apophthegmata*, records stories of the monks of Scetis, but one that is not textually dependent on the *Apophthegmata*.²⁰ If so, then this Ethiopic text might be used to throw light on some vexed questions regarding the historic-

15. Wilhelm Bousset, *Apophthegmata: Studien zur Geschichte des ältesten Mönchtums* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1923), 68-71.

16. Derwas Chitty, *The Desert A City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism Under the Christian Empire* (reprint of 1966 edition; Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 66-71; Guy, "Introduction," *Apophthegmes des Pères*, SC 387:77-79.

17. Jeremy Driscoll, "Exegetical Procedures in the Desert Monk Poemen," in *Mysterium Christi: Symbolgegenwort und theologische Bedeutung: Festschrift für Basil Studer*, ed. Magnus Löhrer, *Studia Anselmiana* 116 (Rome: Pontificio Ateneo S. Anselmo, 1995), 155-78. Driscoll's fine study is limited to examining a handful of examples of Poemen as a biblical interpreter. There is also a brief article by Lucien Regnault, "Poemen," in *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 6:1983-84.

18. See Antoine Guillaumont, "Le Problème des deux Macaires," *Irénikon* 48 (1975): 41-59; Gabriel Bunge, "Evagre le Pontique et les deux Macaires," *Irénikon* 56 (1983): 215-27, 323-60.

19. Poemen appears in several later Coptic sources where he is portrayed as a key disciple in the circle surrounding Macarius the Egyptian: *Virtues of Macarius* 13, 17, 82; Zacharias of Sakha, *Encomium on the Life of John the Little* 71-72. For the texts, see E. Amélineau, *Histoire des monastères de la Basse-Egypte* (Paris: Leroux, 1894). Poemen also appears in the Syriac version of the *Asceticon* of Abba Isaiah, logos 6. For the text, see *Les cinq recensions de l'Asceticon syriaque d'Abba Isaïe*, ed. René Draguet, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* 293, *Scriptores Syri* 122 (Louvain, 1968).

20. Lucien Regnault, "Aux origines des collections d'Apophthegmes," *Studia Patristica* 18 (1989): 61-74.

ity of the *Apophthegmata* and the history of early Egyptian monasticism.

In this essay, I will examine the figure of Poemen as he appears first in the Greek *Apophthegmata* and then in the Ethiopic *Collectio*. I will use what New Testament scholars call the method of "multiple attestation"—comparing what are (or at least what seem to be) two independent sources as a way to probe the historicity of the traditions around Poemen.²¹ As we will see, the Ethiopic *Collectio* not only shows a consistency in the desert traditions about Poemen, it also illumines what one might call a "spirituality of memory," a spirituality that seems to have contributed to the preservation and writing down of the wisdom tradition found in the *Apophthegmata*.

II. POEMEN IN THE APOPTHHEGMATA PATRUM

The *Apophthegmata patrum* does not provide biographical accounts of the Desert Fathers in the way that, say, Athanasius's *Life of Antony* does. According to its ancient editor, the purpose was to "commit to writing a few fragments of their best words and actions."²² The accent, in other words, is on pivotal moments and poignant insights, not the trajectory of a life. Nonetheless, anecdotes about a given figure can come together, like a set of snapshots in a photo album, and seem to offer glimpses of his personality and his teaching. For instance, Abba Pambo appears as a taciturn and oracular reader of souls;²³ Abba John the Little, as a hard-working basket weaver who had both a knack for contemplation and an explosive temper;²⁴ Abba Moses the Black, as a self-deprecating ex-thief famous for his large-heartedness and his fearless martyrdom;²⁵ Abba Arsenius, as a one-time tutor of emperors who fled luxuries and learning for desert poverty and who maintained a cantankerous standoffishness.²⁶

One cannot presume that the *Apophthegmata* is giving an unvarnished portrait. It presents not the historical figure per se, but the figure *as he was remembered in the desert tradition*. Memory can do all sorts of things. It certainly records, but it also selects and edits; it can

21. On the criterion of multiple attestation as well as other criteria for historicity in New Testament studies, see especially John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 167–95, as well as the bibliography that Meier gives at 186–87 n. 7.

22. AP prologue (PG 65:73; trans. Ward, xxxvi).

23. AP Pambo 2, 5, 8, 9; Theophilus 2; cf. Socrates, *Historia ecclesiastica* 4.23 (PG 67:28–872).

24. AP John Kolobos 5, 25, 30, 31, 32.

25. AP Arsenius 38, Macarius 22, Moses 10, 13.

26. AP Arsenius 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, 13, 21, 26, 28, 31, 38.

forget and make mistakes; it can even distort or suppress things. Here I will examine the “snapshots” that the *Apophthegmata* gives of Poemen. These cluster around six basic qualities or traits. In the survey below, I highlight those that are unique to him and those that he shares in varying degrees with others.

The Compassionate Shepherd

The name Poemen (Ποιμήν) means “shepherd.” The name, in many ways, sums up the personality—something Poemen’s own spiritual director remarked on at the outset of his career.²⁷ Poemen was remembered not so much for ascetic feats or visions or miracle working as for his gifts as a spiritual guide. He was deeply tolerant of human weakness. Once some of the old men asked him what to do with monks who, weary from their prayer vigils, fell asleep at the weekend liturgies: “Should we rouse them so that they will be watchful?” Poemen advised compassion: “For my part, when I have seen a brother who is dozing, I put his head on my knees and let him rest.”²⁸ On another occasion, one of his neighbors was a monk who kept a mistress. Poemen cast no judgment on the man. And when the monk’s mistress became pregnant and had a child, Poemen sent one of his brothers over with a bottle of wine as a gift.²⁹ On several occasions, monks came to Poemen, asking what to do about such overt sinners. Once he responded: “If I have to go out and I see someone committing a sin, I pass on my way without reproving him.”³⁰ But Poemen was no laxist. As he said on another occasion, his tolerance sprang from a spiritual rationale: “At the very moment when we hide our brother’s fault, God hides our own and at the moment when we reveal our brother’s fault, God reveals ours too.”³¹

Compassion could lead Poemen to contradict a venerable colleague. One day, a monk came to Poemen deeply troubled about lust. The monk explained that he had already gone to another abba whose admonition—“Don’t let it stay in you”—gave him no solace. Poemen diplomatically circumvented this just-say-no advice. He told the monk: “Abba Ibiston’s deeds are up with the angels. And he does not realize that you and I remain in fornication. If a monk controls his stomach

27. AP Poemen 1 (PG 65:317).

28. AP Poemen 92 (PG 65:344; trans. Ward, 179–80).

29. This is preserved in the collection of the eleventh-century Byzantine scholar Paul Evergetinos, *Synagôgē tōn theophtoggōn rématōn kai didaskaliōn tōn theophorōn kai hagiōn paterōn* (Athens, 1957–66), 3:2B, 22.

30. AP Poemen 113 (PG 65:352; trans. Ward, 183).

31. AP Poemen 64 (PG 65:337; trans. Ward, 175).

and holds his tongue, if he lives like a foreigner, he will not die—be confident of that.”³²

Poemen tried to teach others such empathy. Once there were some monks who used to go to town too often and indulged themselves by going to the baths. The local priest heard of this and publicly defrocked the monks at the liturgy. Later he worried about his harshness and sought Poemen’s advice. Poemen asked: “Don’t you sometimes have a bit of the old Adam in you?” The priest nodded: “I have my share.” So Poemen said: “Look, you’re like them. If you have even a little share of the old Adam, then you too are subject to sin.” The priest called the defrocked brothers back, returned them their monastic habits, and asked their pardon.³³ Poemen himself mitigated harsh penances. When one who had committed some “great sin” came to him, Poemen reduced the penance from three years to three days.³⁴

Occasional grand gestures of forgiveness or tolerance dot the *Apophthegmata*’s landscape, but these appear against a backdrop of fiercely high standards and often fierce intolerance.³⁵ Poemen’s tolerance was more than occasional. Some eighteen stories or sayings touch on this trait of his.³⁶ Poemen, “known throughout Egypt” as a “shepherd of the flock,” recognized that shepherding souls made possible his encounter with the mystery of God.³⁷ As he once remarked: “If Moses had not guided his sheep to Midian, he never would have seen the One in the [burning] bush.”³⁸

The Man of “Penthos”

Once a monk approached the founder of Scetis, Abba Macarius the Egyptian, and asked for a “word” by which he might be saved. Macarius told him “to sit in your cell and weep for your sins.”³⁹ This command touches on a core element of desert spirituality: the virtue of *penthos* (“sorrow,” “compunction”).⁴⁰ As a later Byzantine writer once

32. AP Poemen 62 (PG 65:356–57; trans. my own). Cf. *Verba seniorum* 5.9 (PL 73:876).

33. AP Poemen 11 (PG 65:324–25; trans. my own).

34. AP Poemen 12 (PG 65:325).

35. For example, AP Bessarion 7, Moses 3, Ammonas 10; AP Systematic 5.31.

36. AP Poemen 6, 12, 22, 23, 62, 64, 70, 74, 86, 87, 90, 92, 99, 113, 114, 116, 173, 195.

37. AP Poemen 1 (PG 65:317).

38. AP Poemen 195 (Suppl. 8) (Guy, *Recherches*, 30; trans. my own).

39. AP Macarius 27 (PG 65:273; trans. Ward, 133).

40. See Irénée Hausherr, *Penthos: The Doctrine of Compunction in the Christian East*, trans. Anselm Hufstader, Cistercian Studies 53 (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1982). Technically speaking, *penthos* is “sorrow,” while *katanyxis* is “compunction”; but early on, *penthos* came to be translated in the Latin tradition as *compunctio*.

defined it, "*penthos* is a godly sorrow, engendered by repentance."⁴¹ The term appears in Jesus' beatitudes: "Blessed are the sorrowing [*penthountes*] for they will be comforted" (Matt. 5:4).

The *Apophthegmata* portrays Poemen as a great advocate of *penthos*. Once when a monk asked what to do about his sins, Poemen answered: "The one who wants to pay the ransom for sins pays for them with tears. . . . Weeping: That is the path the Scriptures and our Fathers handed down to us. They say: 'Weep!' There really is no other path than this one."⁴² For Poemen, interior attitude mattered more than tears: "Weep interiorly, for both deliverance from faults and the acquisition of virtues are gained through compunction."⁴³ Once, Abba Poemen saw a woman in a cemetery weeping bitterly over the loss of her husband, son, and brother. He remarked to Abba Anoub that "this woman's whole life and spirit are sorrow"—and, he added, to be a monk one needed such sorrow.⁴⁴

One story portrays Poemen with a devotion to the Virgin Mary and to the crucified Christ that has an almost late medieval flavor about it. One day, Abba Isaac, one of Poemen's disciples, saw his master have an ecstatic experience. Isaac, who was "on terms of great freedom of speech," prostrated himself before Poemen and asked what had happened. Poemen said, "My thought was with Saint Mary, the *Theotokos*, as she wept by the cross. I wish I could always weep like that."⁴⁵

The theme of *penthos* is not unique to Poemen. Mention of it appears in the mouth of figures ranging from Antony and Macarius to Matoes and John the Little. Still, if one surveys the apophthegms in the Alphabetical Collection, nearly half of those that mention it appear either among Poemen's own sayings or among sayings passed on by Poemen.⁴⁶ It is no accident that Douglas Burton-Christie, in his lengthy survey of themes in the *Apophthegmata*, devotes nearly his entire discussion of *penthos* to sayings from Poemen.⁴⁷

41. Nicholas Kataskerperios, *Life of Saint Cyril of Philea*, cited in Hausherr, *Penthos*, 18.

42. AP Systematic 3.29–30 (SC 387:166; trans. my own). Cf. AP Poemen 119.

43. AP Poemen 208 (Suppl. 21) (Guy, *Recherches*, 31; trans. Ward, 195).

44. AP Systematic 3.25 (SC 387:164; trans. my own). Cf. AP Poemen 72.

45. AP Poemen 144 (PG 65:358; trans. Ward, 187).

46. Sayings by Poemen that mention *penthos* (or its corollary, "weeping") are: AP Poemen 26, 39, 50, 69, 72, 119, 122, 144, 204 (Suppl. 17), 208 (Suppl. 21), 209 (Suppl. 22); cf. Poemen 6 and 8. Sayings about *penthos* by others, but preserved by Poemen include: AP Arsenius 41; Dioscorus 2; Timothy 1. For examples in the mouths of others, see AP Antony 33; Ammonas 1; Eupreprius 2; Evagrius 1; John Kolobos 19; Macarius 2, 27, 34, 41; Matoes 11, 12; Moses 6; Melisius 2; Pambo 4; Peter Pionite 2; Silvanus 2; Syncletia 1, Or 1.

47. Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 185–92.

The Moderate Ascetic

Many of the Desert Fathers experimented with harsh ascetic regimens, severely limiting their sleep and their intake of food and drink. For example, Abba Arsenius claimed that "it is enough for a monk, if he is a real fighter, to sleep only one hour"; Abba Dioscorus boasted that he never ate cooked food or fruit or vegetables; and poor Abba Isaiah found himself publicly chided for daring to mix the daily ration of bread and salt with water.⁴⁸ Poemen, by contrast, was critical of extremes: "Many of our Fathers have become very courageous in asceticism, but in fineness of perception there are very few."⁴⁹ Once a monk approached Poemen to ask him about fasting, for he had heard about those who ate only every other day. Poemen admitted that in his younger days he had met those who practiced even more severe regimens—eating only every three, four, even seven days. But he advised against it: "The Fathers tried all this out as they were able and they found it preferable to eat every day, but just a small amount. They have left us this royal way, which is light."⁵⁰ On another occasion, one of Poemen's disciples teased him about washing his feet: "How is it that others practice austerity and treat their bodies harshly?" Poemen's reply was poignant: "We have not been taught to kill our bodies, but to kill our passions."⁵¹

Poemen did not deny the rigors of desert life: "Poverty, hardship, austerity and fasting: these are the instruments of the solitary life."⁵² He stressed that one did have to control one's appetites. Just as King David had seized a lion by the throat and killed it, so the monk had to seize himself by the belly to destroy the invisible lion (presumably, the devil).⁵³ Once, when a monk admitted to eating lots of vegetables, Poemen told him to eat bread instead, with a few vegetables.⁵⁴ Poemen also insisted that wine was not part of a monk's diet and argued that one can hardly acquire "fear of God when our belly is full of cheese and preserved foods."⁵⁵ As Poemen saw it, too much effort spent on meeting physical needs distorted one's spirituality: "Because of our need to eat and sleep, we do not see the simple things."⁵⁶ What was needed was discernment and a balance of exterior and interior disci-

48. AP Systematic 4.3, 13, 10 (SC 387:186, 188, 190; trans. my own).

49. AP Poemen 106 (PG 65:348; trans. Ward, 182).

50. AP Poemen 31 (PG 65:329; trans. Ward, 171).

51. AP Poemen 184 (PG 65:368; trans. Ward, 193).

52. AP Poemen 60 (PG 65:336; trans. Ward, 175, modified).

53. AP Poemen 178 (PG 65:365).

54. AP Poemen 186 (PG 65:368).

55. AP Poemen 19, 181 (PG 65:325, 364).

56. AP Poemen 132 (PG 65:356; trans. Ward, 186).

plines: "To sit in the cell is, externally, to work with the hands, eat once a day, keep silence and meditate; and internally, to make progress by . . . keeping the hours of prayer and keeping a watch on the secret thoughts of the heart."⁵⁷

Among the sayings attributed to Poemen, twenty deal with such ascetic matters.⁵⁸ It is not easy to situate Poemen's ascetic views vis-à-vis others in the *Apophthegmata*. Burton-Christie claims that Poemen's moderate asceticism is expressive of the *Apophthegmata's* basic approach; but it is clear that the ancient editors also preserved voices that taught harsher views.⁵⁹

The Gifted Teacher

Poemen was remembered by his peers for having the "charism of speech" (τοῦ λόγου τὸ χάρισμα).⁶⁰ His remarks about teachers and teaching give us a glimpse of what made him attractive. Once a brother came to Poemen asking if he should assume authority over some monks who lived with him. Poemen told him: "No, be their example, not their legislator."⁶¹ Poemen insisted that a teacher do what he would teach others; as he put it, "Teach your heart to guard that which your tongue teaches."⁶² At the same time, he insisted that the teacher speak with integrity: "Teach your mouth to say what you have in your heart."⁶³ Poemen is portrayed as an astute judge of the human heart and once remarked that "a man may seem to be silent, but if his heart is condemning others he is babbling ceaselessly."⁶⁴ This gift for teaching with and about discernment was recognized by the editors of the *Apophthegmata*. When they had to classify his sayings under the various categories of the Systematic Collection, they ended up putting 36 percent of them in Book 10, "On Discernment."⁶⁵

57. *Verba seniorum* 10.64 (PL 73:923; trans. Chadwick, 118).

58. AP Poemen 16, 19, 31, 38, 40, 57, 59, 60, 106, 132, 150, 161, 168, 170, 181, 184, 185, 186, 203 (suppl. 16).

59. Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 193–98.

60. AP Poemen 108 (PG 65:348; trans. my own).

61. AP Poemen 174 (PG 65:364; trans. Ward, 191).

62. AP Poemen 188 (Suppl. 1) (Guy, *Recherches*, 29; trans. Ward, 193); cf. AP Poemen 25.

63. AP Poemen 63 (PG 65:337; trans. Ward, 175).

64. AP Poemen 27 (PG 65:329; trans. Ward, 171).

65. Of the 117 sayings of Poemen in the Greek Systematic Collection, 43 appear in book 10; of the 76 sayings of Poemen in the Latin *Verba seniorum*, 28 appear in book 10. By way of comparison, the next largest clusters are (in the Greek Systematic): 11 sayings by Poemen listed under book 15 on humility; 9 sayings listed under book 3 on compunction; and 9 sayings listed under book 4 on temperance in food and self-mastery. For a chart correlating the Systematic Collection with the Alphabetical, see Guy, *Recherches*, 126–81.

The *Apophthegmata* portrays Poemen as framing his teaching in easy-to-remember threesomes. In one saying, he lists the three necessary virtues of the monk: "fear of God, prayer, and doing good to one's neighbor."⁶⁶ In another, he enumerates the three great "guides" for the soul's journey: "vigilance, self-knowledge, and discernment."⁶⁷ In still another, he lists three "instruments for the work of the soul": "to throw yourself before God, not to measure your progress, to leave behind all self-will."⁶⁸

Analogies were a favored tool in Poemen's pedagogical repertoire. In one saying, he compares a man of discernment to a woodsman who can fell a tree with a few quick blows.⁶⁹ In another, he speaks of unexamined thoughts as old clothes tossed in a chest, wrinkled and rotting.⁷⁰ In still another saying, he compares hard-working monks to bees and warns: "Just as smoke drives the bees away and also takes the sweetness out of their work, so bodily ease drives the fear of God from the soul and dissipates all its activity."⁷¹ Poemen is not the only figure in the *Apophthegmata* who uses analogies, though his frequent usage—at least thirteen different instances—is unusual.⁷² His images tend to come either from village life along the Nile or from life in the desert. Poemen's older contemporary at Scetis, John the Little, is also portrayed as one who taught with analogies, but John's analogies often expand into intricate allegories, and his imagery comes more from cities than from desert life.⁷³

The Bold Exegete

The *Apophthegmata* gives the impression that the Desert Fathers cited Scripture sparingly. There are even passages in which they express an aversion to discussing Scripture. Abba Poemen was once asked by one of his disciples whether it was better to talk about

66. AP Poemen 160 (PG 65:362; trans. Ward, 189).

67. AP Poemen 35 (PG 65:331; trans. Ward, 172).

68. AP Poemen 36 (PG 65:331; trans. Ward, 172). Other threesomes are AP Poemen 29, 62, 91, 103, 140, 185.

69. AP Poemen 52 (PG 65:333).

70. AP Poemen 20 (PG 65:328).

71. AP Poemen 57 (PG 65:336; trans. Ward, 174).

72. The others (besides AP 20, 52, and 57 cited above) are: AP Poemen 21 (scorpion); Poemen 51 (two farmers); Poemen 111 (flies in a pot); Poemen 127 and 130 (building a house); Poemen 145 (towing a boat down a river); Poemen 146 (putting out campfire); *Verba seniorum* 10.50 (dung and mud around a well). AP Poemen 59 plays on the dangers of living near a lake; this does not sound very desert-like, until one realizes that Scetis was located near marshy natron lakes. AP Poemen 14 does use the un-desert-like image of the king's bodyguards.

73. AP John Kolobos 3, 15, 16, 41. Antony and Syncletia are two others who use analogies with some frequency (AP Antony 10, 21, 35; Syncletia 1, 6, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26).

Scripture or about the sayings of the Fathers. He answered that it was better to speak of the Fathers; they were not as “dangerous” as Scripture.⁷⁴ Poemen’s reservations come out even more dramatically in another story. Once, a famous hermit had heard of Poemen’s reputation for holiness and traveled a long distance to see him. When he arrived, he began speaking with Poemen about the Scriptures. At this, Poemen turned his face away and remained silent. The visitor left, deeply hurt by Poemen’s silence. Poemen’s disciple asked him why he had been so unkind to such a famous man who had traveled so far just to speak with him. Poemen replied: “He is great and speaks of heavenly things, and I am lowly and speak of earthly things. If he had spoken of the passions of the soul, I should have replied, but he speaks to me of spiritual things and I know nothing about that.” The disciple passed on Poemen’s comments to the visitor. And so the visitor returned and admitted that he too was controlled by his passions, and Poemen spoke with him gladly.⁷⁵

Such reticence is but one side. The *Apophthegmata* portrays Poemen as an exegete—and an exegete who shared Origen’s fondness for allegorical interpretation. In the *Apophthegmata*, a handful of the abbas dabble with allegory, but the only other figure who does so more than once is Abba Cronius—and he does so three times.⁷⁶ By contrast, one finds twelve examples among the sayings attributed to Poemen.⁷⁷ Here is an example: “Abba Poemen also said, ‘If Nebuzaradan, the head cook, had not come, the temple of the Lord would not have been burned; that is to say, if slackness and gluttony did not come into the soul, the spirit would not be overcome in its combat with the enemy.’”⁷⁸

74. *Verba seniorum* 11.20 (PL 73:936). In the Alphabetical Collection, this saying is listed under the name of Amoun, the founder of Nitria (d. 353): AP Amoun of Nitria 2 (PG 65:128). That is clearly a mistaken attribution. In AP Amoun of Nitria 3, a brother comes to Scetis (!), not Nitria, to visit Amoun. The Amoun of this saying is clearly Poemen’s disciple, whereas Amoun of Nitria died probably before Poemen was born. In the Latin version, the name given is Ammon, not Amoun. This story appears also in Abba Isaiah’s *Asceticon* Logos 6.4b (Syriac version), where it is part of a set of first-person narratives about Poemen and his disciples.

75. AP Poemen 8 (PG 65:321–324; trans. Ward, 167).

76. AP Cronius 1, 2, and 4. Other examples in the Alphabetical Collection are: AP Agathon 8, Ammonas 11, Epiphanius 13, Peter Pionite 2, Syncletia 11.

77. AP Poemen 16, 30, 34, 50, 54, 60, 71, 112, 115, 126, 136, and 204 (Suppl. 17). Several of these (34 and 126) are not allegories in the sense of a symbolic decoding of the text. Rather, they are “spiritual” readings as Origen and his disciples would have understood it: that is, texts that, if taken very literally, seem problematic. In each case, Poemen reinterprets these texts in light of desert spirituality. A number of other sayings show him citing Scripture in answer to problems: AP Poemen 87, 100, 114, 117, 131, 153. This way of handling of Scripture is a common one in the *Apophthegmata*: see for instance AP Antony 19, 22, 32, 37; Agathon 14; Epiphanius 7, 12, 14, 15; Sisoës 23, 42, 44; Syncletia, 4, 7, 13, 18.

78. AP Poemen 16 (PG 65:325; trans. Ward, 169, modified).

This saying alludes to the tragic story in 2 Kings 25 in which Judea was vanquished by the Babylonians, its king bound and blinded, its leaders dragged into exile. Nebuzaradan was the Babylonian military commander who allowed both Jerusalem's royal palace and Solomon's temple to be ransacked and burned to the ground. The original Hebrew text refers to him as "captain of the guard," but the Septuagint mistranslated this phrase as "head cook." This bizarre, even comical image of a cook burning down the temple and leading Judea into exile seems to have inspired Poemen and led him to interpret the passage allegorically. Here Poemen reads the story with desert eyes: the "head-cook" symbolizes the soul (ψυχή), while the "temple" symbolizes the human spirit (νοῦς), the inner sanctum of the human person. This plays on a widespread view among the Desert Fathers—that the stomach is the gateway to the soul. Gluttony was numbered as the first of the deadly "thoughts," the one that helped bring down Adam. For this reason, admonitions to control one's stomach are commonplace in the literature of the desert.⁷⁹ According to Poemen's interpretation, if the soul fails to be vigilant over the stomach, which is the gateway and outer precincts of the human person, then it leaves one vulnerable to attack at the core, the spirit. Demonic attack diverts the human spirit, that temple of God in the human person, from its natural activity—the contemplation of God.

Poemen's exegesis here may strike the modern reader as odd. But allegory was not simply a matter of decoding obscure texts. It had profound implications for spirituality, as Jeremy Driscoll has noted: "If Poemen only wished to speak about gluttony and contemplation, he did not need to talk about Nabuzardan to do so. But allegory is a tool that enables him to discover a deeper mystery; namely, that there is a continuity between the history of Israel—in this case, one particular detail about a head-cook burning down a temple—and the struggle of the monk. With such a discovery the monk's life is taken up into a drama far larger than a personal struggle with gluttony, or for that matter, any other of the principal evil thoughts. The monk is living the very story of the Bible."⁸⁰

Another instance of Poemen's allegorical exegesis is his interpretation of Psalm 42:1: "As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God." As he tells an inquirer: "For truly deer in the

79. On food and fasting, see Lucien Regnault, *La Vie quotidienne des Pères du Désert en Égypte au IV^e siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1990), 75–94; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 218–22. Cf. AP John Kolobos 3; Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 7 (trans. John Eudes Bamberger, *Evagrius Ponticus: The Praktikos and Chapters on Prayer* [Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1981]).

80. Driscoll, "Exegetical Procedures," 163.

desert devour many reptiles and the snake venom burns them. They try to come to the springs to drink so as to quench the venom's burning. It is the same for monks. Sitting in the desert they are burned by the venom of evil demons, and they long for Saturday and Sunday to be able to go to the springs of waters, that is to say, the body and blood of the Lord, so as to be purified from the bitterness of the evil one."⁸¹ Here Poemen takes the thirsty deer of Psalm 42 and transforms them into snake-devouring desert stags. The legend that deer fed on snakes appears in certain ancient scientific texts and apparently had wide currency.⁸² Once again the *Apophthegmata* portrays Poemen bringing monastic experience to his exegesis. During his weekday solitude in the cell, the monk had to grapple with demonic temptation; on weekends, he joined the larger community of anchorites for Eucharist. Here Poemen reads the psalm's thirsty deer as a cipher for monks who are "thirsty" after a week-long battle with demons. Poemen also reads the passage with christological eyes—the refreshing spring of the Old Testament psalm is a prophetic foreshadowing of Christ, the true life-giving spring. The monk thus finds his identity in the venom-drinking stag refreshed by the divine life of Christ made available in the Eucharist.

The Collector of Wisdom

While Poemen is portrayed as a skilled teacher, exegete, and spiritual guide, his real gift was his memory. As Jean-Claude Guy has noted, "If there were a term to define his personality, we would willingly say that Poemen appears not so much as a pioneer, but as a wise administrator of a treasure of which he has found himself the inheritor. Understanding perhaps that with the devastation of Scetis a page of history had been turned, he worked hard to harvest all the fruits of the great century of Scetis, gathering up the fragments so that nothing would be lost."⁸³ Again and again, the *Apophthegmata* shows Poemen passing on wisdom gleaned from earlier generations. A standard formula that opens sayings throughout the Collections is: "Abba Poemen said that Abba so-and-so used to say . . ." One finds him quoting sayings from or telling stories about earlier monastic figures on at least forty-seven occasions, and in these he quotes an extraordinary range of figures—at least twenty-three different abbats,

81. AP Poemen 30 (PG 65:329; trans. Ward, 171, modified).

82. Burton-Christie, *Word in the Desert*, 211, notes that the legend of reptile-devouring deer appears in an Alexandrian scientific text, known as the *Physiologus*, dating from about 140 B.C.E.

83. Guy, "Introduction," *Apophthegmes des Pères*, SC 387:78.

including Antony, Ammonas, Macarius the Egyptian, Pambo, Sisoës, John the Little, and Moses the Black.⁸⁴ While other monks, on occasion, cite their predecessors, only Abba Daniel and Abba David do so more than once or twice (ten times and four times, respectively), and both limit their quotes to their teacher, Abba Arsenius.⁸⁵ This trait of remembering and passing on the wisdom of his predecessors is not only Poemen's most distinctive trait, it is also one with important implications for Poemen's role in the development of the text of the *Apophthegmata*.

Several citations open up a problem of interpretation and chronology. One saying portrays Antony speaking directly to Poemen: "Abba Antony said to Abba Poemen: 'This is the great work of a man: always to take the blame for his own sins before God and to expect temptation to his last breath.'"⁸⁶ This implies that Poemen's career overlapped with Antony's and thus that Poemen was active at least by the 350s. Another saying says that he was still alive when Abba Arsenius died, that is, shortly before 450.⁸⁷ It is virtually impossible that the same man spoke to Antony in the 350s and was alive until the 450s. Derwas Chitty, in his famous survey of early Christian monasticism, proposed that there must therefore have been two men named Poemen, one of the generation of Antony and Ammonas and another from the first half of the fifth century.⁸⁸ The editors of the *Apophthegmata* did sometimes confuse things and put sayings from more than one figure under the same name. Sayings by Macarius the Alexandrian are found scattered among those listed under the name of Macarius the Egyp-

84. A basic list is as follows: Antony (AP Poemen 75, 87, 125); Adonias (AP Poemen 41); Ammonas (AP Poemen 52, 96); Alonois (AP Poemen 55); Ammoes (AP Ammoes 4); Bessarion (AP Poemen 79); Copres (AP Copres 1); Dioscorus (AP Dioscorus 2); Isidore the Priest (AP Isidore the Priest 5, 6, 10; AP Poemen 44); John the Little (AP John Kolobos 13, 43, AP Poemen 46, 74, 101); Joseph of Panephris (AP Joseph of Panephris 2, *Verba seniorum* 10.30); Macarius the Egyptian (AP Poemen 25); Moses (AP Moses 12; AP Poemen 166, *Verba seniorum* 10.63); Nisterus the Cenobite (AP Nisterus 1, 2; AP Poemen 131); Paësius (AP Poemen 65); Pambo (AP Poemen 47, 75, 150); Paphnutius (AP Paphnutius 3, AP Poemen 190); Pior (AP Poemen 85); Simon (AP Poemen 137); Sisoës (AP Poemen 82, 187); Theonas (AP Poemen 151); Timothy (AP Poemen 79); Zacharias (AP Zacharias 5).

85. For stories on Arsenius passed on by Abba Daniel, see AP Arsenius 17, 19, 23, 26, 39, 42, 43; Agathon 28; Daniel 6, 7. David is cited as the source for four others: AP Arsenius 29, 33, 34, 35. Matões cites a story about Abba Paphnutius (AP Matões 3), and about Abba Tithoes (AP Tithoes 4); Peter cites one about Macarius the Egyptian (AP Macarius the Great 8) and one about Agathon (AP Agathon 1); Paphnutius cites two about Macarius the Alexandrian, though these are listed under the name of Macarius the Egyptian (AP Macarius the Egyptian 28, 37). Other examples: AP Arsenius 13 (from Mark); Arsenius 24 (from Alexander); Achilles 5 (from Ammoes); Bessarion 1 (from Doulas).

86. AP Antony 4 (PG 65:77; trans. Ward, 2).

87. AP Arsenius 41 (PG 65:105).

88. Chitty, *Desert A City*, 69–70.

tian, and a story about John of Lycopolis is ascribed to John the Little.⁸⁹ But Lucien Regnault has argued that such an interpretation is not necessary here. Sayings that show Poemen talking directly to figures of an earlier generation probably reflect confusion in the oral tradition. For instance, the saying about Antony and Poemen appears a second time in the collection, and the wording of the second differs slightly—but significantly. It reads: “Abba Poemen said that blessed Abba Antony used to say, ‘The greatest thing a man can do is to throw his fault before the Lord and expect temptation to his last breath.’”⁹⁰ Here Poemen appears not as one speaking directly with Antony, but as one who passes on what he has presumably heard about Antony from others. In light of this, Regnault believes that there was just one Poemen, who was active from the 380s at the earliest and who passed on what his teachers said about Antony’s generation.⁹¹

III. THE ETHIOPIC *COLLECTIO MONASTICA*

The Ethiopic *Collectio monastica* was first published by Victor Arras in 1963.⁹² Arras’s text is based on two manuscripts, one from the seventeenth century (Ms. Oriental 764 of the British Museum) and the other from the eighteenth century (Ms. Cerulli etiopico 220). Joseph-Marie Sautet has argued that this Ethiopic text is a translation of Greek and/or Coptic originals, probably via an Arabic intermediary. The work, as it has come down to us, is a vast hodgepodge, divided into sixty-eight chapters of varying length. Some contain only a single story; others are excerpts from sermons or treatises.⁹³ Interspersed

89. Guillaumont, “Le problème des deux Macaires,” *Irénikon* 48 (1975): 41–59.

90. AP Poemen 125 (PG 65:353; trans. Ward, 185): “Εἶπεν ὁ ἀββᾶς Ποιμὴν, ὅτι εἶπεν ὁ μακάριος ἀββᾶς Ἀντώνιος, ὅτι . . .” Cf. AP Antony 4 (PG 65:77): “Εἶπεν ὁ ἀββᾶς Ἀντώνιος τῷ ἀββᾷ Ποιμένι, ὅτι . . .”

91. Regnault, “Poemen,” *Coptic Encyclopedia* 6:1983–84.

92. For the text, see *Collectio monastica*, ed. Victor Arras, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* (hereafter CSCO) 238–39 (Louvain: Peeters, 1963). Arras’s edition has a translation of the Ethiopic text into Latin. Lucien Regnault translated the key chapters 13–14 into French in *Les Sentences des Pères du Désert: Nouveau recueil* (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1970), 287–338. The principal study is by Regnault, “Aux origines des collections d’Apophtegmes,” *Studia Patristica* 18.2 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 61–74; see also J. M. Sautet, “Une Nouvelle Collection éthiopienne d’*Apophthegmata Patrum*,” *Orientalia christiana periodica* 31 (1965): 177–88. All translations from the *Collectio monastica* are my own. I wish especially to thank Dr. Getatchew Haile of the Hill Monastic Library at St. John’s University, Collegeville, Minnesota, for checking these against the Ethiopic originals, correcting mistakes and making a number of very valuable suggestions. In the notes that follow, I abbreviate “Ethiopic *Collectio monastica*” as “Eth. Coll. mon.”

93. For chapters that contain only a single story, see Eth. Coll. mon. 4 = AP Arsenius 33; Eth. Coll. mon. 8 = AP Daniel 7; Eth. Coll. mon. 9 = AP Daniel 3; Eth. Coll. mon. 10 = AP John Kolobos 15; Eth. Coll. mon. 38 = AP Paul the Simple. For chapters that contain excerpts

throughout the *Collectio* are chapters that contain minicollections of sayings of the Desert Fathers. The chart below gives a chapter-by-chapter accounting of these collections, noting the number of parallels between the Ethiopic *Collectio* and the Greek *Apophthegmata*:

Chapter Number in the <i>Collectio monastica</i>	Total Number of Sayings in the Chapter	Number of Sayings with Parallel in <i>Apophthegmata</i>	Number of Sayings without Parallel in <i>Apophthegmata</i>
Chap. 13	99	9	90
Chap. 14	67	13	54
Chap. 15	14	14	0
Chap. 16	17	15	2
Chap. 28	8	7	1
Chap. 35	10	10	0
Chap. 36	11	7	4
Chap. 37	34	29	5
Chap. 39	30	17	13

These numbers highlight something recognized first by Sauget and then developed by Regnault—chapters 13 and 14 of the *Collectio* are unique. Of the 166 sayings in these two chapters, only 22 have any known parallels in the classic Greek collections. In other words, these two chapters contain a great deal of previously unknown material. Regnault has argued that these two chapters preserve a primitive collection and that this collection offers vital insights into the formation of the *Apophthegmata*. If the Ethiopic text does preserve such a primitive collection (and, as we will see, that does seem quite plausible), what is the relationship between it and the better-known versions of the *Apophthegmata*? Let me suggest an analogy. Most biblical scholars believe that the Gospel of John is not dependent on the written text of the Synoptics, but represents an independent literary tradition that nonetheless shares certain links in the oral tradition. In the same way, these two chapters from the Ethiopic *Collectio* seem to represent a literary tradition independent of the

from sermons or treatises, see Eth. Coll. mon. 16 = Moses the Black, *Seven Headings of Ascetic Conduct* (PG 65:288–89); Eth. Coll. mon. 23 = Abba Isaiah, *Asceticon Logos* 3; Eth. Coll. mon. 26 = Pseudo-Nilus (that is, Evagrius Ponticus), *De octo spiritibus malitiae* (PG 79:1145–1164); Eth. Coll. mon. 50 = Palladius, *Lausiac History* 18 (story of Macarius and the hyena; see Cuthbert Butler, *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, Texts and Studies 6.1–2 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898–1904]).

Greek versions of the *Apophthegmata*, yet one that shares with them a common oral tradition. I cannot retrace all of Regnault's fine analysis here. But let me highlight a few features that emerge from comparing these two chapters of the Ethiopic *Collectio* with the classic Greek collections.

(1) Names of Elders. Many of the abbas mentioned in the Greek collections appear also in the Ethiopic: Agathon, Achilles, Ammoes, Amoun, Abraham, Ares, Alonois, Dioscorus, Zacharius, Isaiah, Theodore, John, Isidore, Cronios, Lot, Macarius, Moses, Nisteros, Peter, Paphnutius, Sisoës, Serapion. In the Ethiopic, certain names are given further specification: for instance, Sisoës becomes Sisoës of Petra, Mios becomes Mios of Baleos, John becomes John of Kellia.

(2) Absence of Foreigners. In the main Greek (and Latin) collections, there are sayings from famous non-Egyptians who had little direct connection with Egyptian monasticism, such as Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, or Epiphanius of Salamis. These same collections also contain sayings from foreigners who settled, either permanently or at least for some years, in Egypt: for example, Hilarion, Silvanus, Evagrius Ponticus, John Cassian, and Arsenius. (In fact, the presence of such figures is one indicator that the classic Greek collections were probably put together not in Egypt, but in Palestine.) The Ethiopic *Collectio*, by contrast, mentions none of these foreigners.

(3) Place Names. The proportion of the place names in the Ethiopic *Collectio* matches that of the Greek *Apophthegmata*: Scetis appears most often (eighteen times), then Kellia (eight times), and finally Nitria (twice). Other places mentioned in the Greek collections appear in the Ethiopic: Diolcos, Pherme, Petra. The Ethiopic also mentions places not found in the classic collections: Arwe, Herahu, Tameryas, Mt. Panahon.

Regnault has argued that the monk who compiled the sayings preserved in these two chapters of the Ethiopic *Collectio* probably lived in the middle of the fifth century. This monk-compiler applies the expression "My father" only to certain figures: Joseph (13.70, 13.83), Paphnutius (13.81), Sisoës of Petra (13.73), and Ares (13.95). This terminology indicates, according to Regnault, a master-disciple relationship. The monk-compiler does not apply this terminology to Abba Poemen, but he does seem to have known Poemen (13.48, 13.57, 13.79, 14.63). All this indicates that the monk-compiler either lived at Scetis or at least dealt with monks who spent part of their lives at Scetis.⁹⁴

94. Monks from Scetis appear prominently. The monk-compiler mentions interviewing Dioscorus (13.56); he also knew Moses and Zacharias (14.34, 14.32; 13.96) and his disciple John (14.10; 14.32).

among the sayings by or about Poemen: fifteen of these forty-one sayings have first-person formulae. Some sayings claim to be from monks who knew Poemen personally. For example: "I heard Abba Poemen saying to me . . ." (13.57, 13.89); "Abba Poemen said to me . . ." (13.79); "I heard that Abba Poemen had also said . . ." (13.97).⁹⁷ Others seem to be one generation removed: "Abba Jacob said to me, 'I asked Abba Poemen . . . [And] he said . . .'" (13.96); "Abba Agueras said to me, 'I once went to Abba Poemen and said to him . . . He responded . . .'" (14.66); "I heard that a brother had asked Abba Poemen about this word of the Apostle . . . And Abba Poemen said to the brother . . ." (14.3).⁹⁸ One may even be two generations removed: "A brother said to me, ' . . . I said to the old man . . . and the old man said to me, 'I often asked Abba Poemen about this matter and he answered me . . .'" (13.6).⁹⁹

Let me give a basic conclusion at the outset: the Poemen of the Ethiopic *Collectio* looks like the same figure found in the Greek *Apophthegmata*, even though the two works do not (apparently) share any textual interdependence. To appreciate this claim, let me compare "photo albums," so to speak, retracing the six qualities of the Poemen of the *Apophthegmata* and showing how they reappear in the Poemen of the *Collectio*.

The Compassionate Shepherd

Like the Poemen of the *Apophthegmata*, the Poemen of the Ethiopic *Collectio* is noted for his compassion. In one story, a monk visited Abba Cronios of Mt. Panahon who assigned him "a great penance" and commanded him: "Do not open your door except on Saturday and Sunday." In other words, the monk was not to exercise the traditional monastic duties of hospitality, but instead was to adhere to strict enclosure. The monk then related (in a first-person narrative): "I then went over to Abba Poemen and he absolved me from all penance and ordered me to open my door."¹⁰⁰ As in the *Apophthegmata*, Poemen here is portrayed as a moderator of penances.

Poemen's compassionate side comes out in a story paralleled in the *Apophthegmata*. Here are the two versions:

97. Eth. Coll. mon. 13.57, 79, 89, 97 (CSCO 238:98, 103, 107–8).

98. Eth. Coll. mon. 13.96, 14.3, 14.66 (CSCO 238:108–9, 126).

99. Eth. Coll. mon. 13.6 (CSCO 238:84).

100. Eth. Coll. mon. 13.7 (CSCO 238:84–85).

Ethiopic <i>Collectio monastica</i>	Greek <i>Apophthegmata patrum</i>
<p><i>A brother said: "I once went to Abba Poemen and as I was with him, a brother came and said to him:</i> <i>'My father, help me. For I went to Abba Pes and I said to him: "Help me because lust assails me."</i> <i>He made fun of me and said to me: "Why do you let lust conquer you?" ' "</i> <i>Abba Poemen said to the brother:</i> <i>'Abba Pes, having himself arrived at the measure of the Lord, thinks all men are like him, and he does not know that I and you are the abode of lust.' "</i> <i>You see how the old men used to comfort the brothers.</i></p>	<p>One day a brother came to Abba Poemen and said to him: "What should I do, father, for I am tempted to fornication? I went to Abba <i>Ibiston</i> and he said to me: 'You must not let it stay with you.' "</p> <p>Abba Poemen said to him: "Abba <i>Ibiston's</i> deeds are up with the angels. And he doesn't realize that you and I remain in fornication.</p> <p><i>If a monk controls his stomach and holds his tongue, if he lives like a foreigner, he will not die—be confident of that.</i>"¹⁰¹</p>

I have put in italics phrases not paralleled in the two versions. The most obvious difference is the names of the respective abbats, Pes vs. Ibiston. Notice that the Ethiopic version contains a first-person opening—claiming that it is an eyewitness account by one of Poemen's immediate disciples. While the two versions clearly describe the same event, one does not seem to be a translation of the other. The same points are expressed in rather different wording: "lust assails me" (Eth.) vs. "I am tempted to fornication" (Gk.); "Why do you let lust conquer you?" (a rhetorical question in the Eth.) vs. "You must not let it stay with you" (a command in the Gk.); Abba Pes has "arrived at the

101. Eth. *Coll. mon.* 14.44 (CSCO 238:120); AP Poemen 62 (PG 65:356–57; trans. my own). Cf. AP Systematic 5.9 (SC 387:250); *Verba seniorum* 5.9 (PL 73:876); Syriac version of Enanisho, book 1, saying 581 (E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Wit and Wisdom of the Christian Fathers of Egypt: The Syrian Version of the "Apophthegmata Patrum" by Anân Ishô of Bêth Âbhê* ([London: Oxford University Press, 1934], 172–73).

measure of the Lord" (Eth.) vs. "Abba Ibiston's deeds are up with the angels" (Gk.).¹⁰² The Ethiopic version makes clearer why the monk might have felt downcast: Abba Pes had "made fun" of him—whether it had been a harsh jibe or simply gentle teasing is not clear. Also the Ethiopic ends with a unique punch line: "You see how the old men used to comfort the brothers." The point of the Ethiopic is clear: Poemen is put forward as an exemplar of an older generation, now past, which comforted those who struggled.

The Man of "Penthos"

Earlier, we saw how the *Apophthegmata* portrays Poemen as a man of *penthos*, as one who made "sorrow" central to his spirituality. This quality appears less dramatically here than in the *Apophthegmata*, but several sayings in the Ethiopic *Collectio* do touch on this theme. For example: "Abba Isaac, [the disciple] of Abba Bis, said: 'A brother said to me that Abba Poemen had said: "You will find many [monks who live] in great abstinence: they fast every Friday, Wednesday, and Monday; they often distribute alms; and they love the brothers. But you will not find many who are in penance." The brother asked him: "What is a heart in penance?" And Abba Poemen said to him: "It is the man who puts his [own] thought below everything for the sake of the Lord." ' ' "¹⁰³ This is another of the genealogical sayings so characteristic of the *Collectio*. In this case, Abba Isaac passes down what he heard from a brother who knew Poemen. Here Poemen downplays exterior ascetic feats (fasting and almsgiving), and instead emphasizes the inner attitude of penitence. There is no explicit mention of weeping as in certain sayings in the *Apophthegmata*, but the point of the saying is interior attitude, not outer behavior.

The Poemen of the Greek *Apophthegmata*, as we saw, tended to speak in threesomes. Several threesomes appear in the Ethiopic. In one case, Poemen notes that a good woodsman can fell a tree in three blows and then lists "sorrow" among the three "blows" that the strong monk needs to be victorious ("humility of spirit" and "fear of the Lord" being the other two).¹⁰⁴ In another case, Poemen describes his own penitential piety in a terse threesome: "Abba Poemen said: 'There are [always] three mysteries before me: it is good for me to pray at all times before the Lord, without stopping; to place my death before me at all times; and [to think] that, when I die, I will be thrown into the fire

102. Cf. Eth. *Coll. mon.* 13.96 (CSCO 238:108): "I knew that Abba Poemen had also said: 'It is the great glory that a man knows his measure.' "

103. Eth. *Coll. mon.* 13.24 (CSCO 238:89).

104. Eth. *Coll. mon.* 14.11 (CSCO 238:111).

because of my sins.' "¹⁰⁵ Here Poemen lays claim to a central practice of desert spirituality—unceasing prayer.¹⁰⁶ But he does so in the context of acknowledging himself as mortal and as a sinner. By picturing himself as deserving damnation, Poemen fiercely cultivates in himself the penitent's heart, knowing that he must face Christ the judge.¹⁰⁷

The Moderate Ascetic

The Poemen of the *Apophthegmata* was critical of ascetic extremes and insisted that the monk eat every day. That unusual advice appears in two stories in the Ethiopic *Collectio*. Here is the first: "Abba Poemen said: 'I knew a brother at Scetis who persevered three years in fasting every Monday without arriving at conquering [the passions]. But when he had abandoned fasting on Mondays and instead fasted with discernment [each day] until dusk, he did not cease to conquer from then on.' Abba Poemen said to me also: 'Eat without eating, drink without drinking; sleep without sleeping; conduct yourself with discernment and you will find peace.' "¹⁰⁸ This saying is unusual in the way it combines a third-person saying with a first-person one. The monk whom Poemen criticizes here evidently fasted on Mondays because he would have feasted on Sundays at the community's weekly *agape*; the monk was, in other words, making up for what he saw as community-sanctioned self-indulgence. Poemen is critical because the monk made fasting an end in itself rather than an instrument for quelling the passions. Poemen then spells out what he sees as a method of fasting "with discernment": to eat daily, but not until late afternoon. Poemen's point here is that fasting must be a part of the larger search for peace and that such a search requires discernment.

In another saying, a brother comes to Poemen and cites the case of an old man who ate only barley bread and who fasted one day out of

105. *Eth. Coll. mon.* 13.46 (CSCO 238:95–96).

106. The admonition to pray unceasingly appears in a variety of texts: Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 3, 55 (Eng. trans. Robert C. Gregg, *Athanasius: The Life of Antony*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 49 and *Ad virginem* 4 (H. Gressmann, *Nonnenspiegel und Monachsspiegel des Euagrios Pontikos*, Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der alchristlichen Literatur 4 [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1913], 1465); AP Benjamin 4, Epiphanius 3, Lucius 1; AP N 85, N 123. For a discussion, see Regnault, "La prière continue 'monologistos' dans la littérature apophthegmatique," *Irénikon* 47 (1974): 467–93, reprinted in *Les Pères du Désert à travers leur Apophthegmes* (Solesmes: Abbaye Saint-Pierre, 1987), 113–39; Gabriel Bunge, " 'Priez sans cesse': aux origines de la prière hésychaste," *Studia Monastica* 30 (1988): 7–16.

107. Cf. AP Systematic 3.4 (SC 387:151).

108. *Eth. Coll. mon.* 14.63 (CSCO 238:125).

two. Poemen countered: "We, on the contrary, work ourselves continuously, every day with two hands and we are not filled up, but the hand of the Lord fills us—the body as much as the spirit."¹⁰⁹ The stress here, as in the *Apophthegmata*, is that monastic living demands balance—balancing fasting with work, body with spirit. Poemen contrasts the two-day fast of the ascetic extremist with the two-handed labors of the ideal monk. He notes that the worker whose hands are full of work is filled by the "hand of the Lord." Asceticism is not an end in itself; the issue is grace.

The Gifted Teacher

In the *Apophthegmata*, Abba Anoub speaks of Poemen having the "gift of speech." In the *Collectio*, Abba Macarius the Egyptian makes a similar remark. Once a brother passed by Scetis and asked Macarius the paradoxical question: "How can a man die completely while living?" Macarius then asked: "Wouldn't these words perhaps be those of Abba Poemen?" When the brother admitted that he had in fact taken them from Poemen, Macarius remarked: "I was saying to myself how much these words seemed to be those of Abba Poemen."¹¹⁰

Poemen in the *Apophthegmata* routinely teaches with analogies and draws on the experience of the desert for his imagery. That propensity is even more obvious in the *Collectio monastica*. In one saying, Poemen uses an analogy of ostrich hunters: "I went over to Abba Poemen . . . and he said to me: 'It is said that when the ostrich lays eggs in the desert, the hunters come and follow it by its claw tracks; they find the egg and take it away. That is why you must guard the works that you do for the Lord and keep them lest you waste your efforts. For whatever a person does in secret, that the Lord loves. The inner toil of the pure person is this. For it is by that that one wins the victory. For the soul desires pride—and that [pride] is death. The fear of the Lord and discernment blot out every stain.'¹¹¹ Poemen's point here is a traditional one—that pride, especially pride in spiritual achievements, is *the* great vice. To avoid pride, he advises the monk to keep his spiritual practices secret. If Poemen's point is conventional, his pedagogy is not. He could easily have cited biblical texts, especially Jesus' admonitions in Matthew 6 against "practicing your piety before others." Instead, he invokes a closer-to-home, though exotic analogy of an ostrich and its eggs.

109. Eth. Coll. mon. 13.5 (CSCO 238:84).

110. Eth. Coll. mon. 13.49 (CSCO 238:96).

111. Eth. Coll. mon. 13.7 (CSCO 238:84–85).

differences are interesting:

Ethiopic <i>Collectio monastica</i>	Greek <i>Apophthegmata patrum</i>
A brother said to me: “Abba Poemen said to me, ‘See this empty jar. If someone were to fill it with serpents, lizards, and scorpions and then leave the jar sealed and abandon it, aren’t all these rep- tiles going to die there? And if you open the jar, won’t all the creatures get out and sting people? And so, it’s the same for a man: if he watches his tongue and shuts his mouth, all the creatures die under him. But should he work his tongue and speak, the venomous crea- tures will come out and sting his brothers and the Lord will be angry.’ ” ¹¹⁴	Abba Joseph put the same ques- tion and Abba Poemen said to him, “If someone shuts a snake and a scorpion up in a bottle, in time they will be completely de- stroyed. So it is with evil thoughts: they are suggested by the demons, they will disappear with pa- tience.” ¹¹⁵

The Ethiopic version gives the saying as a first-person narrative and shows it to be at one generation’s remove, while the Greek names Abba Joseph as the source. Both versions play on the same analogy—creatures with a deadly sting sealed in a bottle. But the precise moral of each differs somewhat. In the Greek, the issue is impure thoughts suggested by demons who will, in time, disappear. In the Ethiopic, the issue is hurtful words. Here Poemen echoes a common teaching in desert spirituality: that words can wound and that the monk needs to “keep a lid” on things.¹¹⁶

The Bold Exegete

In the *Apophthegmata*, Poemen appears as an exegete who uses allegorical methods and reads texts in the light of desert living. The

114. Eth. Coll. mon. 13.84 (CSCO 238:106).

115. AP Poemen 21 (PG 65:328).

116. AP Poemen 49, 57, and 84.

same is true of the Ethiopic *Collectio*. Poemen again appears as an allegorist and decoder of obscure texts. Let one extended example suffice:

Abba Poemen said: "The rocks that Moses placed under his two arms until Joshua had conquered Amalek and had exterminated them are the fear of the Lord and the humility of the spirit. To flee sin and not be submissive to it—that is the fear of the Lord. And to carry all your sins—that is humility of spirit. When Achan, the son of Carmi, stole the gold ingot and the mantle of Shinear in Jericho, and when Israel went to war against the Philistines and the Philistines conquered Israel, Joshua was in pain and shed tears before the Lord and said: 'Why, Lord, have you delivered us into the hands of our enemies in order that they may exterminate us?' The Lord said to Joshua: 'Why do you weep before me? Go, remove from yourself the objects of anathema and I will deliver your enemies into your hands.' And when the Israelites had removed from their midst the objects of anathema, the Lord delivered their enemies into their hands. We too should push away now from our midst the objects of anathema. But now the bad thought is always with us. And the bad thought—that's the object of anathema. The bad thought—that's to submit ourselves to these objects and do their wills. So the Lord does not live in us and that is why our enemies are victorious against us. But if we remove them from ourselves, we will conquer and we will exterminate them, because God will be with us."¹¹⁷

In this saying, Poemen joins two Old Testament episodes: Exodus 17:10–13 and Joshua 7. According to Poemen, the two episodes are linked by the theme of extermination. In the first, God delivers Israel's enemy, the Amalekites, into its hands; in the second, God delivers Israel into the hands of its enemy, the Philistines. The Poemen of the Ethiopic *Collectio*, like the Poemen of the *Apophthegmata*, interprets these biblical episodes in light of desert spirituality. Moses with his two hands lifted up in prayer is invoked as the image of the true monk. Like Moses, the monk conquers his enemies by prayer. Poemen then allegorizes: the two "columns" that support the upraised hands of the prayerful monk are the desert virtues of fear of God and humility of spirit. Poemen's explanation of each virtue is paradoxical. Fear usually makes one run away, but fear of God makes the monk stay put. He

117. Eth. *Coll. mon.* 13.78 (CSCO 238:102–3). Three other examples of Poemen as an exegete are: Eth. *Coll. mon.* 14.3 (CSCO 238:109), in which he decodes the paradoxical Pauline phrase: "that the one who wishes to become wise must make himself a fool in order to become wise" (1Cor. 3:18); Eth. *Coll. mon.* 13.96 (CSCO 238:108), in which he decodes an obscure phrase from the Psalms: "You gave your grace to man because they renounce by inhabiting" (Ps. 67:19); and Eth. *Coll. mon.* 13.89 (CSCO 238:107), in which he uses Ps. 17:30 ("By my God, I can leap over a wall") to explore the psychology of grace.

flees sin by standing still. Carrying heavy things usually makes standing up straight difficult, but the monk who humbly carries his sins is not weighed down, but stands upright. Poemen then turns the lengthy story of Achan and the "objects of anathema" into a symbol of letting impure thoughts bring havoc into one's interior life. The monk is conquered by his (demonic) enemies if he allows forbidden thoughts into his inner self, but can exterminate them if he purges himself of thoughts.

The Collector of Wisdom

The *Apophthegmata* portrays Poemen routinely passing on the wisdom of previous generations, but it gives no rationale *why* he did so. One story in the Ethiopic *Collectio* seems to offer a rationale. In this story, a monk comes to Poemen and opens his heart about one of his great fears:

An old brother said to Abba Poemen: 'When I remain here at your place, Father, thoughts assault me: that I should no longer come to you.' And Abba Poemen said to him, 'Why?' The brother said to Abba Poemen: 'Because I come to you and I hear your word, but I cannot do it. May your word not be my condemnation on that [last] day!' And Abba Poemen said to him: 'I once talked with Abba Macarius at Scetis and Abba Macarius told me: "Don't stop visiting the old men. There will come a day when, if you wish to serve [God], you will conquer by the word of old men. If thoughts erupt in you all over again, remember the words of the old men, and you will find help in them and you will be saved."' ¹¹⁸

A little background is needed to appreciate this. The *Apophthegmata* routinely portrays monks approaching elders with the request: "Abba, give me a word that I might be saved."¹¹⁹ The "word" that the elder spoke on such occasions was venerated as a prophetic word, a word of discernment given by God (via the elder) as a key to unlock the inquirer's heart. The monk was expected to obey wholeheartedly and bring that "word" to fruition in the way he lived.¹²⁰ In this case, the

118. *Eth. Coll. mon.* 13.72 (CSCO 238:101).

119. For example: AP Antony 19; Arsenius 9; Eupreprius 7; Macarius 23, 28, 41; Moses 6; Poemen 69; Sisoës 35; Serapion 2; N 91 & 387; cf. AP Felix 1. On this genre, see the classic article of Jean-Claude Guy, "Remarques sur le texte des *Apophthegmata Patrum*," *Recherches de science religieuse* 43 (1955): 252–58; also Graham E. Gould, "A Note on the *Apophthegmata Patrum*," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s., 37 (1986): 133–38; Benedicta Ward, "Traditions of Spiritual Guidance: Spiritual Direction in the Desert Fathers," *The Way* 24 (1984): 61–70, reprinted in *Signs and Wonders* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1993).

120. AP Felix 1 (PG 65:433; trans. Ward, 242) describes an incident in which an elder refuses to give a "word" to some seekers and says that the charism of the "word" has disappeared from the "old men": "now, since [the brothers] ask without doing that

monk fears his failure. He fears that if he does not live out the "word" Poemen has given him, God will hold it against him on Judgment Day. Poemen, as usual, is sympathetic. He admits that he suffered from the exact same fear when he was younger and that he consulted his own famous abba, Macarius the Egyptian, about the matter. He then passes on what Macarius told him: "remember the words of the old men." He would "conquer" by their words; he would be "saved" by their words.

This incident captures much about Poemen, about the way in which the desert tradition remembered his personality and his spirituality. It illustrates, of course, his warm-hearted sympathy for those in anguish. It also shows the way Poemen passed on and reused wisdom from venerable figures of the past. What makes this story so striking is the way it quite precisely articulates *why* Poemen took such care to remember and pass on the words of the "old men": Abba Macarius had (prophetically?) told him that by "remembering the words of the old men," he—Poemen—could find salvation. In other words, the Poemen of the Ethiopic *Collectio* articulates here what one finds the Poemen of the *Apophthegmata* doing—remembering and passing on a saving wisdom of the "old men." The Poemen of the *Apophthegmata* never says *why* he so repeatedly passes on the wise words of an earlier generation. But this saying gives his rationale: that Poemen worked from what one might call a "spirituality of memory." He was convinced that the words of the old men possessed a saving wisdom, that if he could just remember the words of the old men, especially at moments of crisis, he and his disciples would be saved.

IV. POEMEN AND THE SPIRITUALITY OF MEMORY

In this study, we have explored how both the Greek *Apophthegmata* and the Ethiopic *Collectio* portray Abba Poemen. He figures prominently in both, appearing in about one-quarter of the sayings. There is a striking convergence in the way the two documents portray him. Both describe him as a compassionate "shepherd" of souls, as a man of *penthos*, as a moderate ascetic, as a gifted teacher, as an exegete with a fondness for allegory, and as a collector of his predecessors' wisdom. Two stories we examined offer direct parallels, yet neither offers a word-for-word parallel such as one would find if the two documents were textually interdependent. Rather, the two stories seem to rely on a common oral tradition, but in their final written form diverge in wording and emphasis—though without serious distortion of their message.

which they hear, God has withdrawn the grace of the word from the old men and they do not find anything to say, because there are no longer any who carry their words out."

Both the convergence in the overall portraiture and the convergence in these two specific stories have significance for assessing certain of the complex issues surrounding the historicity of the *Apophthegmata*. Graham Gould has argued that the Ethiopic *Collectio* is important “not because it is a source for the alphabetical-anonymous series [of the *Apophthegmata*], but because it is not.” The *Collectio* thus offers “a check on the sort of changes that occurred in the oral tradition, and therefore on the reliability of that tradition and the fidelity with which the alphabetical collection reproduces it.”¹²¹ One must be cautious here. Gould’s claim is true *only if* chapters 13 and 14 are indeed an *independent* source that dates from the mid-fifth century, and *only if* the Ethiopic text itself accurately reproduces the original sayings, which had to pass through a whole series of translations—from oral Coptic to (probably) written Greek to (perhaps) Arabic to the final Ethiopic text. These are not insignificant *ifs*. Still, Regnault’s argument that these two chapters of the Ethiopic *Collectio* come from an independent mid-fifth-century source seems plausible. The *Collectio*’s first-person openings may well indicate personal reminiscences, and its care to give the genealogy of a saying does indicate a conscious effort at faithfully remembering the wisdom of the past. However, just because a document claims to pass on accurate memories is no guarantee that it does so.

If one can get past these two important *ifs*, then this study offers further confirmation for those, like Gould, who argue for the fidelity and accuracy of the oral tradition behind the *Apophthegmata*. The method used here relies on what New Testament scholars would call the “principle of multiple attestation”—isolating common sayings, events, or personality traits in textually independent documents. Multiple attestation, of course, does not guarantee historicity. A story about Poemen could have been invented in the oral tradition, then passed on, and picked up independently into two different texts. Still, while this study may not get us back to the “historical Poemen,” it does show a marked coherence in the desert’s oral traditions about Poemen.

Most striking is the final saying we looked at, in which Poemen tells the monk to “remember the words of the old men,” and that by remembering he “will be saved.” According to the *Collectio*, Poemen received this same admonition from his teacher, Abba Macarius the Egyptian. Can this be taken literally? Can this be taken as historically accurate? Let me suggest that if it is, it would explain a great deal. It would explain why the Poemen of the *Apophthegmata* appears as one

121. Gould, *Desert Fathers on Monastic Community*, 21.

who gathers and passes on the wisdom of earlier generations, why one finds him quoting all those other abbas. It would explain much not only about Poemen, but also about both the Greek *Apophthegmata* and the Ethiopic *Collectio*. Both documents are testimonies to the place of memory in early Christian monasticism. Both documents carefully record and pass on a venerable oral wisdom from the pioneers of desert monasticism. Both documents also share an underlying "spirituality of memory," presuming that by remembering the words of the old men, monks may find roads to salvation. In both documents, Poemen stands at the center of that task of remembering. Could such a concern for memory go back to the historical Poemen? One would certainly have to get past some formidable *ifs*. But it seems a reasonable conjecture.

This image of Poemen as a man of memory and a collector of his predecessors' wisdom finds confirmation in a much later and little-known Coptic source: the *Encomium on the Life of John the Little* composed by Zacharias, the seventh-century bishop of Sakhâ. At one point, Zacharias makes an intriguing remark about Poemen: "Then, indeed, the great and discerning one, the great wise one, our holy father Abba Poemen, who became a new Paul in his generation, first of all in true wisdom narrated many achievements of many luminaries among our fathers, serving the wondrous works of the Holy Spirit that dwelt in our fathers in order to benefit our souls. Furthermore, the truly wise and all-holy Abba Poemen also wrote down many achievements of our father Abba John the Little."¹²² Here Zacharias knows Poemen as one who had gathered narratives, perhaps even writing them himself, about "the achievements" of the great "luminaries."¹²³ When Wilhelm Bousset first hypothesized that Poemen and "his school" were instrumental in the creation of the *Apophthegmata*, he cited this text as indication. Bousset, however, did not have access to the *Collectio monastica*. And this Ethiopic text not only confirms the image of Poemen as collector of sayings; it provides a rationale why he

122. Zacharias of Sakhâ, *Encomium on the Life of John the Little* 71; for the text, see E. Amélineau, *Histoire des Monastères de la Basse-Egypte*, Annales du Musée Guimet 25 (Paris: Leroux, 1894), 379; the translation is by Maged S. Mikail and Tim Vivian, "Zacharias of Sakhâ: An Encomium on the Life of John the Little," *Coptic Church Review* 18 (1997): 46.

123. Zacharias mentions that his main source for the life of John the Little was a book entitled *Paradise* (Life, 1). Some 36 percent of the *Encomium* has parallels in the *Apophthegmata*. It is possible that the work entitled *Paradise* is simply a Coptic version of the *Apophthegmata*, but it also possible that it had a more narrative structure. Zacharias seems to draw on other sources: in no. 71, he cites Poemen as his source; and in no. 75, he draws on other unnamed sources. On Zacharias's distinctive understanding of "narrative" (*istoria*), see the valuable discussion by Vivian, "Zacharias," 4–6.

did such collecting—a “word” from Macarius himself that such remembering provided a path of salvation. And this Ethiopic text seems to preserve a much older source, one much closer in date to Poemen himself, and—if one takes the first-person formulae seriously—one that preserves reminiscences of monks who either knew Poemen personally or knew those who had been Poemen’s disciples.

I have used the phrase “spirituality of memory” to characterize Poemen’s commitment to remembering the words and deeds of his monastic predecessors. Let me tease this out by looking briefly at two passages from two of the most important fourth-century monastic texts. The first is from Athanasius’s *Life of Antony*. Toward the end of the work, Athanasius notes how those whom Antony had converted to the monastic life grappled with his death: “And indeed, now that [Antony] has died, they all, being bereft of a father, comfort one another solely by the memory of him, clinging to his admonitions and warnings.”¹²⁴ The context is important. Immediately after this passage, Athanasius stresses Antony’s desire to be buried in an unknown spot. As David Brakke has shown, Athanasius wishes to move against a spirituality that locates the holy spatially, in burial grounds containing the relics of the holy dead; rather, Athanasius insists, holiness is found interiorly, in “memory,” in “clinging” to “admonitions and warnings.” This is precisely what we saw Poemen doing—clinging to the memory of those fathers who preceded him, gathering together their admonitions and warnings, that hard-won wisdom of earlier generations of monks, and passing it on to others.

A second text comes from one of Poemen’s contemporaries, Evagrius Ponticus (d. 399).¹²⁵ Evagrius had served as a deacon in Constantinople under Gregory of Nazianzus and was a close friend of the great Latin notables, Melania the Elder and Rufinus of Aquileia, who had set up monasteries in Jerusalem. Evagrius would become one of the great theoreticians of Christian mystical spirituality, though after his death he would be branded as an Origenist and formally condemned by the

124. Athanasius, *Vita Antonii* 88 (SC 400:362); Gregg, *Life of Antony*, 95. On this issue, see David Brakke, “‘Outside the Places, Within the Truth’: Athanasius of Alexandria and the Localization of the Holy,” in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt*, ed. David Frankfurter (Leiden: Brill, 1998), esp. 453–63.

125. On Evagrius’s life and works, see Antoine Guillaumont and Claire Guillaumont, *Évagre le Pontique: Traité Pratique ou le Moine*, SC 170 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971), 21–112; for a brief survey, see idem, “Évagre le Pontique,” *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 4:1731–44. On Evagrius as an Origenist, see Antoine Guillaumont, *Les “Kephalaia Gnostica” d’Évagre le Pontique et l’histoire de l’origénisme chez les grecs et chez les syriens*, *Patristica Sorbonensia* 5 (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1962); Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Council of Constantinople in 553. In the 380s Evagrius settled in Kellia, one of the great monastic settlements of Lower Egypt. While travel between Kellia and Scetis was hazardous, Evagrius apparently made the journey often enough to number himself among the disciples of Poemen's spiritual father, Macarius the Egyptian. At the close of his treatise, *Praktikos*, Evagrius appends nine brief apophthegms about Antony, Macarius, and others. These are significant because they are the earliest *written* collection we have. In introducing them, he notes: "It is a very necessary thing also to examine carefully the ways of the monks who have traveled, in an earlier age, straight along the road and to direct oneself along the same paths."¹²⁶ He then closes his minicollection by noting why his monastic predecessors deserved such respect: "Our old men are to be honored like the angels for it is they who have anointed us for the battles and who treat the wounds we suffer from the bites of wild beasts."¹²⁷ Evagrius's stress is striking. Not only are the "old men" pioneers who chart a road to be imitated; they are battle-hardened veterans whose wisdom heals the wounds of the present generation. Remembering is medicinal; it is a sort of antivenom against demonic snakebite.

These two texts show that concerns about remembering venerable elders were in the air in the late fourth century. Thus Poemen's practice was not, strictly speaking, unique. Poemen's uniqueness comes from the number of sayings he passes on and from the range of figures he quotes. Zacharias of Sakhâ claimed that Poemen was a writer. That is not impossible. One saying mentions Poemen sending a letter to an anchorite, though another one mentions that he knew very little Greek.¹²⁸ That might mean either that he was literate in Coptic, but not in Greek, or that he may have dictated things to a scribe. But all of this could have happened orally. He could have collected oral stories and sayings and passed them on orally to his disciples. The literary form that those sayings and stories eventually took, namely, the apophthegm, is one rooted in oral storytelling. The impetus for such collecting could well have come from the admonition of Macarius recorded in the *Collectio*, and could have been spurred further by the destruction of Scetis. In 407, Poemen and his circle had fled and had witnessed the anguishing destruction of their whole way of life. On the far side of that destruction, there was no longer a living circle of abbas where a saving wisdom could be found. That wisdom now dwelt in memory. Back in Scetis, Poemen was known to have deferred to his elders: "It

126. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 91 (SC 171:692); trans. Bamberger, 39.

127. Evagrius, *Praktikos* 100 (SC 171:710); trans. Bamberger, 41.

128. AP Poemen 90, 183 (PG 65:344, 365–68).

was said of Abba Poemen that he never wished to speak after another old man, but that he preferred to praise him in everything he had said."¹²⁹ After the destruction of Scetis, he carried on this deference in a new way—by collecting and passing on the saving words of the “old men” to his disciples.

But Poemen was not just a subject who remembered. He was also an object of memory. Poemen’s own sayings and deeds—several hundred of them—were treasured, preserved, passed on, and, in the end, committed to writing. The Greek *Apophthegmata* preserves one set of memories, the *Collectio* another set. And both sets show that the circle around him valued his compassion, his *penthos*, his moderation, his exegeses, his knack for teaching, and his “charism of word.” Most of all, that circle valued his memory, his habit of passing on the wisdom of a bygone age. If we are to appreciate this spirituality of memory, we need to note not just Poemen remembering, but also the community remembering Poemen remembering.

We cannot let modern questions about historicity divert us from understanding how memory worked in the community around Poemen. That community, from all indications, did take great pains to remember accurately. But it was not accuracy for accuracy’s sake. It was not the accuracy that might move a modern historian, or one that might have moved an ancient historian. It was accuracy for the sake of spirituality. Poemen’s community was convinced that remembering provided access to the holy, to salvation. It needed Poemen’s words and even more his memories because it desired holiness and sought pathways to find holiness. Its concern was not past facts, but past wisdom that might serve the present quest. In the wilderness of the human spirit, as in the wilderness of the desert, landmarks are precious. And the memory of Poemen—his words, deeds, memories, his very act of remembering—provided landmarks. Memory of Poemen hearkened back to a golden age, when God showered charisms on the old men, when God allowed them to read their disciples’ hearts like an open book and speak a word that would reveal to them a pathway across the demon-ridden landscape of the human heart.

Poemen and his circle had biases—if the texts of the *Apophthegmata* and the *Collectio* are any indication. The memories preserved in both texts differ in focus, to some degree, from concerns found in other desert literature. In the *Life of Antony*, Athanasius portrays an Antony deeply concerned about Christology—about a Christ who enjoyed a cosmic victory over the demons and whose full divinity has been slandered by the heretical Arians. In his treatises, Evagrius explores

129. AP Poemen 105 (PG 65:348; trans. Ward, 182).

the contours of a life of mystical gnosis, in which the monk encounters in prayer a formless imageless light glittering in the depths of the mind, a light reflecting the light of the Trinity. Meanwhile, two important travelogues, Palladius's *Lausiac History* and the anonymous *History of the Monks of Egypt*, lay great stress on the wonders and miracles wrought by the Desert Fathers. But there is little of this in either the *Apophthegmata* or the *Collectio*—little mention of Christology or mystical prayer or miraculous deeds. The wisdom of the *Apophthegmata* and of the *Collectio* clusters around other topics: the practical stuff of desert living, the tangled passions of the heart and the tangled conflicts that divided monk from monk, the need for an honest sorrow for sin and the need for an honest self-effacing compassion if monks hoped to live together in some measure of peace. These accents are the accents of Poemen, the “shepherd” of souls.

The question of the origins of the *Apophthegmata* is a complex one. This study has touched on one small part of it, for the stories and sayings of Poemen form but one stream of many in the final text. Not only does the material on Poemen deserve further study; there needs to be further study on how the material on Poemen fits in the larger whole. I have not tried to address a whole set of questions about the crucial transition from oral wisdom to written text, a transition that likely took place in the generation after Poemen, among his disciples and their contemporaries. There is also the question of how this spirituality of memory shaped and, in turn, was shaped by textuality, how the textuality of the *Apophthegmata* created, in essence, a portable desert wisdom, making it possible for Egypt to be carried around the Empire.